

A Very Eligible Place

PROVO & OREM

AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY

By Kenneth L. Cannon II



Walter Orem's Salt Lake and Utah Railroad, seen here circa 1925, for many years provided the most convenient link between Salt Lake City and cities and towns in Utah County. Some of the rich farmland the interurban traversed in Orem and northern Utah County has now been developed into residential neighborhoods and commercial strips. Courtesy, Photo Archives, Brigham Young University



Company. This business ran successfully for a number of years and prompted others to investigate the Provo area as a possible site of a large steel plant.

In the 1920s the Columbia Steel Company was so impressed with the availability of necessary minerals and the abundance of water in Provo that it constructed its Ironton plant on the southern border of the city. The trains brought in coal and iron ore from relatively close mines and transported finished steel products from Provo. Several companies established auxiliary industries near the Ironton plant, the largest of which, the Pacific States Cast Iron Pipe Company, is still in operation.

Later, during the early days of World War II, a reliance in the West on Eastern-made steel and the fear of a Japanese attack on the West Coast prompted the federal government to construct a large inland steel mill on the shores of Utah Lake in Orem. The U.S. government chose the site on Utah Lake where, protected from enemy attack by surrounding mountains, steel could be produced in quantity and transported on the existing excellent rail facilities to markets around the country. Utah Lake and newly constructed Deer Creek Reservoir in Provo Canyon provided both

the large amounts of water and the control of the lake's shoreline thought necessary for the production of steel. The Geneva plant, as it was called, went quickly into production. It was purchased after the war by United States Steel Corporation, which has operated the plant and provided employment for many Provo and Orem residents. Geneva has in recent years faced potential closure and has been required to lay off hundreds of employees. Only time will tell whether this large plant, created in the midst of wartime need, will survive.

Another local industry was the result of the innovative efforts of Lucien L. Nunn, who came to Provo in the late 1890s. Nunn, an Ohioan who had studied law at Harvard, was an early advocate and developer of electrical power and had been involved in the pioneering use of alternating current in Telluride, Colorado. Nunn and his brother, Paul, believed Provo River had potential for hydroelectric power, and they soon signed a contract with the owner of a mill in the mining town of Mercur, some 32 miles from Provo, to supply electricity to the mill. A dam was constructed on the river three miles above the mouth of Provo Canyon, and the Nunn power plant was constructed next to the dam. Power lines were

run, and soon the Provo/Orem area boasted the longest transmission line in the world and the first 40,000-volt line in the United States.

The insulator developed for the powerful transformers at the Nunn plant was used generally in the industry for years and was called the "Provo-type" insulator. In 1903 the Nunns built a larger, more powerful electrical plant, Olmstead, at the mouth of Provo Canyon. They also established a school at Olmstead where the first advanced technical training was offered in Utah.

Recent years have seen the growth of high technology and entertainment industries in Provo and Orem. Entrepreneurs have drawn on the expertise of faculty members and graduates of BYU to develop computer software, industrial diamonds, and other high-tech products. The construction of the Osmond Entertainment Studios in Orem and the presence and activities of actor Robert Redford (who lives in Provo Canyon) have spurred the development of an entertainment industry in the area. In the 1970s and 1980s a number of motion pictures and television shows were produced and made in the Provo area, and the Sundance Institute for aspiring filmmakers was created at Redford's Sundance Resort, near where BYU's Alpine summer school was held in the 1920s and 1930s. The Sundance Institute now also sponsors the annual U.S. Film Festival, held every winter in Park City.

The location of Provo and Orem on the railroad, their natural beauty and resources, and their industries have attracted many residents to the area and have also provided the impetus for the growth of commercial and merchant businesses in the cities. Downtown Provo served for decades as the central shopping area of the entire county. Practically every kind of retail business could (and can) be found in the blocks clustered around Center Street and University Avenue. The structures built to house these businesses have ranged from the ornate and stately to the simple and humble. The men and women who have



owned and operated these establishments have throughout the city's history played an important part in the growth and development of Provo.

More recently Orem's rapid development of a large regional shopping mall and numerous shopping centers on the sites of former orchards and fields has shifted the commercial focus away from Provo. Many consumers have found that they prefer the convenience of Orem's new shopping malls to Provo's historic downtown area. Orem's wide-open spaces and aggressive encouragement of commercial development have made it the retail center of Utah Valley. Provo has responded with the sometimes-successful revitalization of the downtown area and the development of shopping centers in newer areas of the city.

As well as being the historical, industrial, and commercial center of the area, Provo has been the seat of governmental activities. The beginnings of city and county government in Provo are found in the Mormon Church. For the first few decades the ecclesiastical and civic leadership overlapped. The mayor of the town was very often president of the LDS stake, while the judge of the powerful county probate court was apt to be bishop of one of the Provo LDS wards, making these men both the secular and ecclesiastical leaders of most of the town's resi-

This little building was used as a city building, county building, and as the county courthouse. It was constructed in 1873, and the contractors were paid one-third in cash, one-third in grain, and one-third in shares of Provo Woolen Mills stock. By 1919 the courthouse was found to be hopelessly small for the needs of the growing city and county, and plans were then made to construct a new and larger city and county building. Courtesy, Photo Archives, Brigham Young University

Lucien L. and Paul Nunn in the late 1890s established the Nunn plant in Provo Canyon where they pioneered in the production and transmission of alternating current. In 1903, they built the larger Olmstead plant in the mouth of Provo Canyon, pictured here in a circa 1910 photograph. In connection with the plant, they started a technical school for engineering students that was the first of its kind in Utah. The beautiful grounds and buildings at Olmstead are now owned and kept up by Utah Power and Light Company and generally go unnoticed because of the surrounding large trees. Courtesy, Olson and Hafen Collection, Photo Archives, Brigham Young University

dents. With the coming of gentiles to the area and the growing number of alienated Mormons in Provo, this situation slowly began to change. The anti-polygamy crusade of the U.S. government, which led eventually to the disfranchisement of large numbers of Latter-day Saints, weakened the political power of the Mormon Church. There was a corresponding increase in the strength of the Liberal Party, made up almost entirely of non-Mormons and non-practicing Mormons, in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

In the late 1870s the Liberal Party was born in Utah to combat the political hegemony of the Mormons. The Saints, who until then had not needed to organize politically because there was little political opposition, countered soon after with a party of their own, the People's party. People's party candidates were almost always elected in municipal and territorial elections until the 1890s when the effects were felt of the disfranchisement of Mormon voters by the Edmunds-Tucker Act. Liberal Party candidates were elected in the early 1890s even in predominantly Mormon Provo. Soon thereafter, however, accommodation of Utah culture and politics with American society as a whole was instituted, and local Mormons and gentiles joined the national parties, the Republicans and the

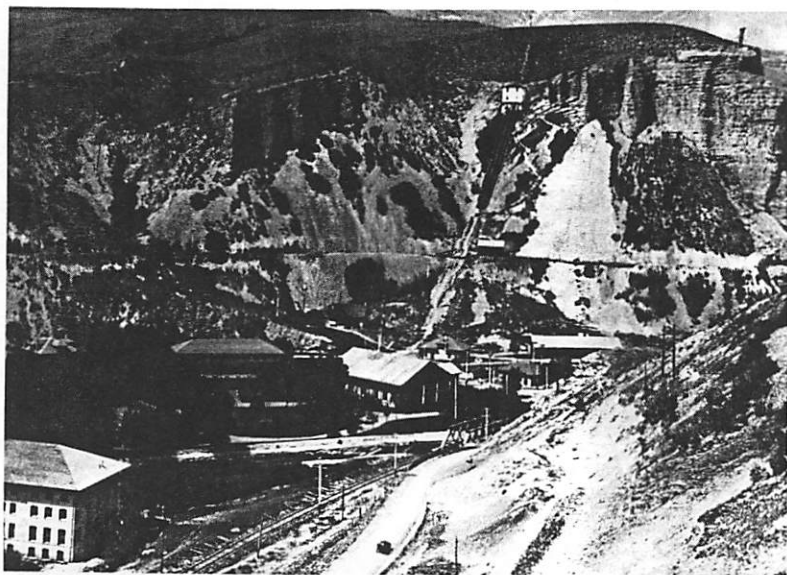
Democrats.

Of the local political issues in Provo and Orem history, many have been easily resolved, and others have had a divisive effect on the cities. Controversy in Provo has arisen over such issues as prohibition of intoxicating beverages and east side-west side conflicts regarding the placement of important buildings and institutions. Orem's political controversies have included separation from Provo, location of the city hall, and commercial development of the spread-out city. Issues involving both cities (with the two sometimes taking opposing sides) are disputes over water rights to the Provo River and the development of regional shopping centers in competition with Provo's downtown merchants.

The issue that excited the most sustained controversy in Provo was prohibition, beginning soon after the first settlement when Joseph Meham sought a license from the town government to sell liquor. He was apparently granted the license, but in 1855 the first attempt at enforcing temperance was seen, as Provo leaders made liquor licenses very expensive. A prohibition ordinance followed in 1861.

Throughout the nineteenth century the legality of liquor shifted back and forth. Sometimes private citizens were granted licenses to operate stills and sell their wares, while at still other times alcohol was banned altogether in Provo. The city even attempted to establish a limited monopoly on the market, with a city distillery and a liquor store.

The prohibition controversy came to a head, so to speak, in the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1909 local LDS leaders and BYU's administration presented a petition to the city council asking for the enactment of a prohibition ordinance. The ordinance was passed, precipitating the city's most interesting municipal election in 1910. In that year a majority of the members of both the Republican and Democratic parties in Provo favored prohibition. Provo's only viable third-party movement appeared when the "wets" of both parties formed a one-issue political



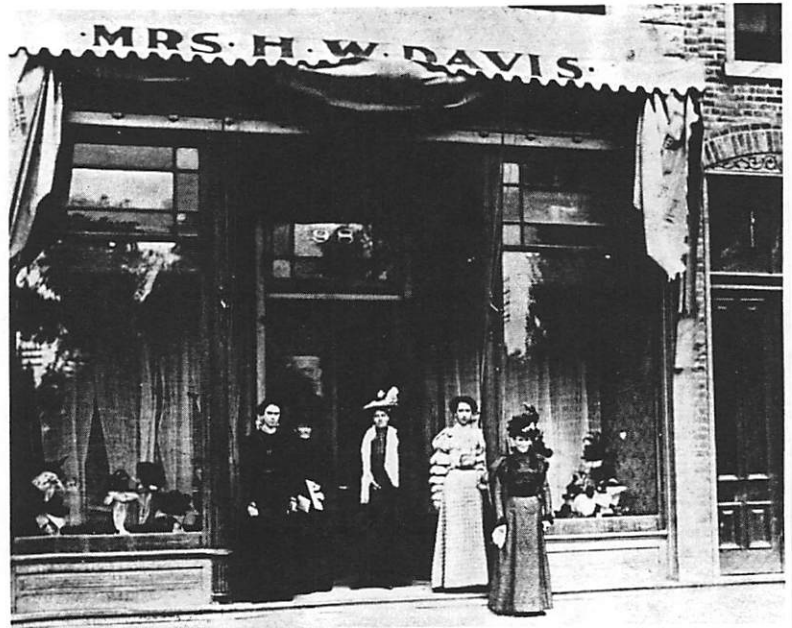
party under local entrepreneur and banker W.H. Ray. The Democrats and Republicans agreed on city council candidates, but not on candidates for general city offices such as mayor. Thus the "drys" elected their consolidated slate of candidates to the city council, but the separate Republican and Democratic candidates for the general offices split the vote, allowing the wets to elect Ray as mayor.

The "wet" mayor urged repeal of the 1909 prohibition ordinance and the dry council refused. Mayor Ray nominated a "wet" city marshal and the council refused to confirm the nomination. The council resolved to dismiss two "wet" policemen and the mayor vetoed the resolution. The ordinance remained on the books, but the stalemate between the two sets of officials made enforcement of the ordinance less than strict. Of course, the local issue was representative of a national movement that resulted in the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

Another major political controversy, which seems minor in retrospect though it continues to a limited extent today, centered on the east side-west side debate, best represented by the conflict over the location of the new railroad station in the early twentieth century. For years Provo had two small stations near the corner of University Avenue and Sixth South. As the city grew, and the importance of rail transport with it, efforts were made to have either two larger stations or one central station to service both railroads going through Provo. These efforts began in 1891, but there were conflicts with the railroads and nothing happened until 1905, when the need for better facilities was critical.

The matter entered the local political arena the same year when west side businessman Thomas N. Taylor raised the needed funds and purchased a site at Sixth South and Third West for a new station. East side businessmen, among them Jesse Knight, bitterly opposed construction at the proposed site, which was on the west side.

Neither faction was able to gain an advantage



until 1908 when the city council, pressured by the two railroads, voted to permit construction of the station on the site donated by the west side. However, Jesse Knight convinced the district court in Provo that the question should be put to the city's taxpayers, and the court issued a temporary restraining order to enjoin construction at the site. A special election was held in July 1909, and by a narrow vote the site on Third West was confirmed.

In January 1911 the new train station was finally completed, and Provo at last had a depot appropriate to its size and importance. Ironically, the train station has come to represent the decline of southwest Provo in recent years as the depot has gone almost totally unused. In 1986 the station was razed in controversy just as it had been constructed in controversy three-quarters of a century earlier. Preservation-minded residents fought unsuccessfully to save the structure, an important and fascinating slice of Provo history.

In 1919 residents of Provo bench voted to create their own city and to construct their own water system (they believed, probably correctly, that Provo was unwilling or unable to construct such a system). Some Provo businessmen, fearful that loss of the bench area with its rich farms would be detrimental to the economy of

By no means was Provo business monopolized by men, as shown in this photograph of Mrs. H.W. Davis' millinery shop during the 1890s. The shop, located at 98 West Center Street, was a mainstay in downtown Provo for a number of years. Courtesy, Photo Archives, Brigham Young University